

## **HIV INTERRUPTED**

### **Scarlett Rodrigues, Dominican College, Galway**

The tiny red Fiat turns the city centre corner and slows to a stop in front of me. I open the door and am met with a beaming smile, the driver, John, matches the size of the car. We first met in Paris where, with a shared love of art, we bonded during the mandatory Louvre visit.

Today we are delivering “Brass Munkie’s”, a quarterly publication he draws all the artwork for by hand. Thinking we might stop so I can interview him, John tells me “driving is my best hobby” so we continue through inner city Dublin while he talks about his life.

Four mornings a week he teaches tai chi before teaching an art class then heading to the other side of the city to work on Brass Munkie. A busy man, but so calm you would never know. From his quiet, seemingly shy voice, you would never imagine his great acting achievements.

Chatting happily about growing up in inner city Dublin and the family coal business. His demeanour changes and the 56 year old grins when he talks about his wife - good memories must come to mind. He tells me they are lifelong friends who grew up on the same street and have been together nearly 40 years. Her parents didn’t approve of their relationship, but in his own words “love is blind and it was meant to be.” The couple now have two children and four grandchildren.

In the nineties, John went through a rough patch - as many young men do. For him, this meant drugs and resulted in addiction. He was among the first group of people to be diagnosed with HIV in Ireland.

In his quiet voice, with eyes fixed on the road ahead, John tells me of the day in 1992 he and his wife sat in a councillor’s office and were told about his positive status. He ran outside and even in the open space felt the world closing in on him. Not only was he shocked, but frightened. People weren’t educated about HIV in 1992 and John thought he probably only had one year to live. The news sent him into a spiral and his addiction became the focus. He felt he needed an escape from reality and drugs provided this.

In 2003, over a decade after being diagnosed, John started treatment. It was called a “cocktail” and he took around 20 tablets a day with massive side effects. Today, after living with HIV for more than twenty-five years, John takes two tablets a day and the virus is no longer detectable in his system. This just shows how far we have come in HIV/AIDS treatment, and how much it has improved the lives of the millions of people who live with it.

Asking how HIV impacts his life now, John explains that the virus itself has no impact, however, the stigma around it is still strong. He would like to see improved education, starting with schools. He hopes his grandchildren will be taught using evidence and not scare tactics when the topic is discussed in their classrooms.

We pull over to deliver a handful of the magazines to a respite centre for people with HIV and John tells me many young people are still in the dark about how it is contracted and scared of touching a person with HIV. The sadness in his eyes highlights why we need proper education in schools, so the next generation can make sure there is no stigma and people will know the facts.

As we take the final turn before getting out of the car I thank him for his openness and honesty. When we learn about HIV at school, teachers don’t tell us that this can happen

to anybody, or that people can live long healthy lives and have HIV undetected in their system for many years.

John is not only my friend but an extraordinary person and spokesperson for people with HIV. He has taught me that HIV is far from being a life sentence and that he can still do all the things he loves.

It's not possible to know if someone has HIV by looking at them. In Ireland approximately 7000 people live with HIV and the European Centre for Disease Control estimates a further three in ten people living with HIV don't know their status. With these figures and an average of ten people being diagnosed each week, there is a chance some of my friends have a positive status. To them I say, I chose you as my friend and will support you to live the life you choose.